Multiple-Act Consequentialism and Losses from Defection

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Subject: Refinements in a form of consequentialism required by losses in value due to defection from group acts.

Abstract:
Mendola, *Goodness and Justice* (Cambridge 2006) develops a novel form of consequentialism involving group acts, called ‘multiple act consequentialism’. It depends on the observation that many cooperative practices, including many moral practices, are group acts, and that a given individual may be part of many group acts that specify conflicting roles for that individual at a time. It has four central tenets: 1) Among a particular set of options, the most choiceworthy is the best. 2) VLD or ‘Very Little Defection’: One should only defect from a group act with good consequences if one can achieve better consequences by the defecting act alone than the entire group act achieves. 3) DD or ‘Defect to the Dominant’: When different beneficent group agents of which one is part specify roles that conflict, one should follow one’s role in the group act with more valuable consequences. 4) One should join whatever group acts it is consequentially best to join, given the constraints set VLD and DD. The most characteristic tenets of multiple act consequentialism are VLD and DD, and they are motivated by the claim that all acts, including group acts, should be evaluated, and their conflicts adjudicated, by regard to their direct consequential weight in value. Because many actual moral practices are group acts, multiple act consequentialism can support more intuitive normative implications than traditional forms of act
consequentialism. And because it focuses on actual forms of cooperation, it can also evade traditional difficulties of rule consequentialism.

However, Ben Bradley (Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 2012) has argued that multiple-act consequentialism is unworkable in some cases in which one’s defection from a group act would lead it to have much worse consequences than it otherwise would have. This paper further develops multiple-act consequentialism to avoid this problem. Defection from group acts in cases in which otherwise beneficent group acts would be hence constituted as worse than nothing is only appropriate when it meets a second test, beyond VLD, namely when more good is gained than lost by defection. This modification is supported by the same type of rationale that supports VLD in normal cases. The paper also introduces further refinements required by related but more complicated cases due to Aaron Bronfman.